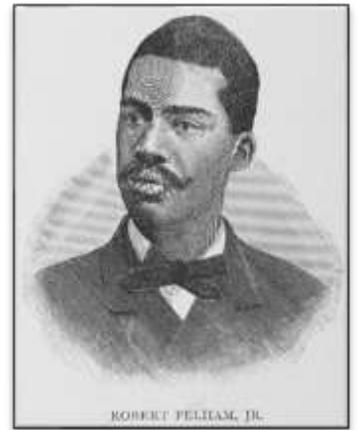


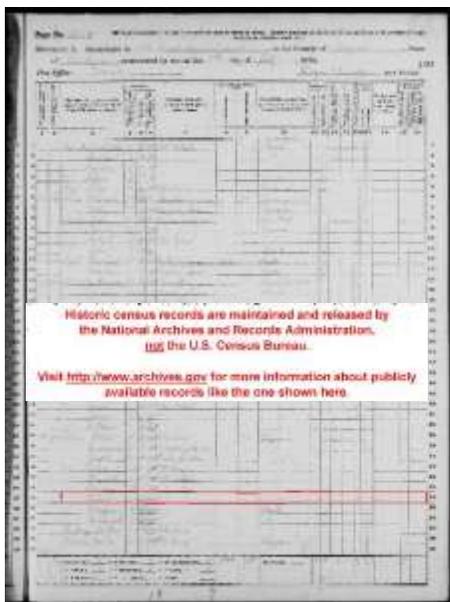
Robert A. Pelham Jr.

Newspaper Editor, Activist, Career Census Supervisor

The U.S. Census Bureau is proud of its history of continually evolving to ensure an accurate count of the people of the United States. To accomplish this, the Census Bureau has long embraced the hiring of a diverse workforce representative of local communities and the people who were a part of the neighborhoods that they counted. For this reason, census work was often one of the few government jobs open to minorities. Beginning with the 1870 Census (the first after the abolition of slavery), the Census Bureau began hiring African Americans as enumerators and data processors. With the creation of a permanent Census Bureau in 1902, Black workers and statisticians found an environment with an inclusiveness far greater than many contemporary institutions.



William J. Simmons and Henry McNeal Turner, *Men of Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* (1887).



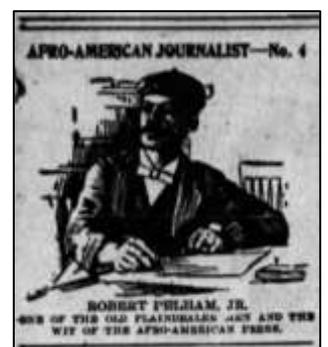
Robert is listed as "At School" on the family's 1870 census.

Robert A. Pelham Jr. was born on January 4, 1859, in Petersburg, Virginia, into a family of free African Americans. His father, Robert Sr., managed the family's farm and worked as a masonry contractor. Frances, Robert's mother, managed a household that eventually consisted of her husband, three daughters, and four sons. Shortly after Robert's birth, his parents moved the family north and settled in Detroit, Michigan. There, Robert attended the city's public schools and, beginning in 1871, started working for the *Daily Post* newspaper.

Upon completing his public education three years ahead of schedule, Robert's professional career skyrocketed. Throughout the 1880s, Robert climbed the professional ranks of the *Daily Post* until leaving the paper in 1891. Furthermore, Robert, his younger brother Benjamin, and two of their associates founded and edited *The Detroit Plaindealer* in 1883. As an editor, Robert used his newspaper as a tool

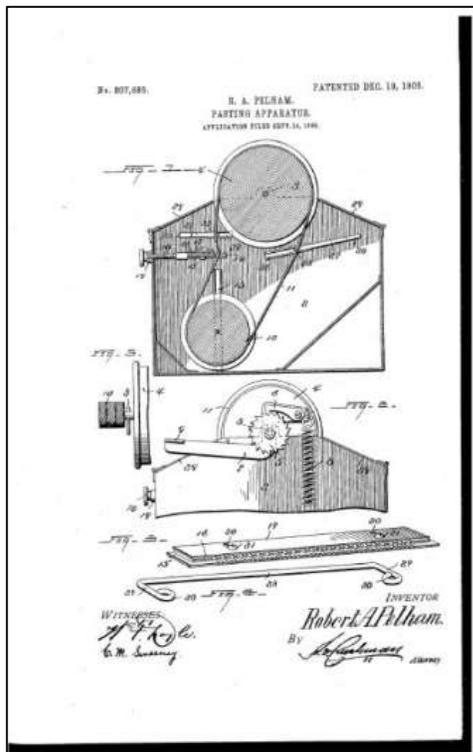
for highlighting the voices of African American leaders, such as Ida B. Wells and William E. Matthews as they championed the idea of creating a national Civil Rights organization. By providing readers with interesting content from prominent African American activists and other relevant stories, *The Detroit Plaindealer* became one of the most widely read weekly newspapers among Southeast Michigan's African American community between 1883 and 1893.

In addition to his newspaper career, Robert also began his civil service career while living in Michigan. From 1887 to 1891, he served as a deputy oil inspector for the state. Following this, he worked as an inspector in Detroit's Water Department (c. 1893-1898) and as a special agent for the U.S. Land Office (c. 1892-1899). On April 5, 1895, Robert married Gabriella Lewis, a 29-year musician from Ohio. The young couple lived in Michigan for five years before they and oldest daughter, Dorothy, moved to Washington, D.C.



Robert (above), Benjamin, and two of their business partners founded *The Detroit Plaindealer* in 1883.

The New York Age
(New York, New York) February 14, 1907.



Robert's pasting apparatus (pictured above) saved the Census Bureau more than \$3,000.00.

Image Courtesy of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

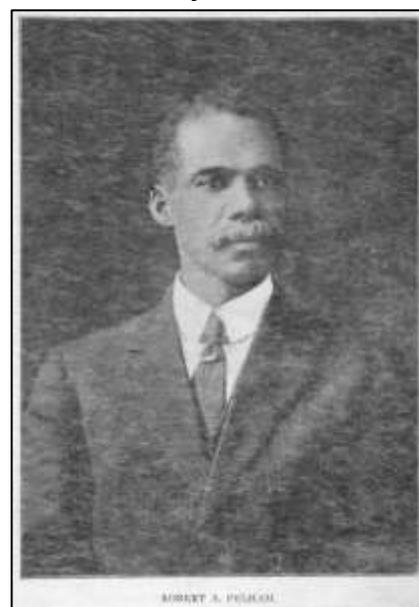
Arriving in Washington, D.C. in July 1900, Robert began his impressive 29-year-career at the U.S. Census Bureau. Like many Census employees, he started as a clerk, but quickly rose through agency's ranks. Two years after arriving at the Bureau, Robert tabulated 1,150 industry census schedules in one day, shattering the previous record set by a census clerk named W.A. Bolinger and the average daily tabulation count of 591 census schedules. Additionally, he invented and patented a pasting apparatus in 1905 and a new tallying machine in 1913. Robert also attended night school and received his law degree from Howard University in 1904.

Among his many important accomplishments, he, along with Charles E. Hall and William Jennifer, also authored a special census report entitled "Negro Population: 1790-1915." Published in 1918, this report provided policymakers and academics with a detailed history of the African American population up to that point in time. More importantly, the report served as one of the first official reports to provide evidence of the "Great Northward Migration" and potential causes. When Robert retired from the Census Bureau in 1929, he had earned promotions up to the head of a division of special statistics.

In addition to his work with the Census Bureau, Robert continued to serve his local community and promote civil rights. In 1919, he was elected to the American Negro Academy (ANA), which served as the nation's first African American organization dedicated to supporting African American scholarship. Eventually, Robert won election as the ANA's executive secretary for the remainder of the organization's existence. He also served as a member of the Spingarn Medal Commission from 1940 to 1942, which awarded medals from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to African Americans of outstanding achievement.

After he retired from civil service and his civil rights activities, Robert returned to his journalistic roots. Between 1939 and 1941, Robert took over and managed the *Washington Tribune*, a prominent African American newspaper. He also founded Capital News Services, Inc., which furnished "syndicated news to a hundred or more weekly newspapers throughout the country."

Ultimately, Robert passed away in his Washington, D.C. home, on June 12, 1943, at the age of 84. His wife, Gabriella, four children, and four grandsons all survived him and built upon his legacy of service to the African American community and nation. His older daughter Dorothy Pelham Beckley served as the second national president of Delta Sigma Theta sorority from 1923 to 1926. His other daughter, Sara Pelham Speaks followed in her father's footsteps and became a lawyer and activist and entered public service when she ran as the first African American woman candidate for a major political party during the 1944 U.S. Congressional election cycle. We are grateful to Robert A. Pelham for his extensive service to U.S. Census Bureau and for his and his family's service to their communities and nation.



Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. "Robert A. Pelham." *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1913. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-aa96-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.